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**YOUTH, POPULATION AND DEVELOPMENT IN LATIN AMERICA
AND THE CARIBBEAN**

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

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INTRODUCTION

This document examines the characteristics and perspectives of the young people of Latin America and the Caribbean, focusing on how their situation relates to population issues and development. The central question around which the paper is organized is the extent to which the current characteristics and situation of the region's youth allow the deployment of their potential contribution to the production and reproduction of a society oriented towards balanced economic, social and political development, that is, development that promotes economic growth together with social integration based on equity and democracy. To address this issue, the analysis first describes that potential contribution and then focuses on the barriers and problems that impede its realization.

A. YOUTH, SOCIETY AND REPRODUCTION

1. The historic relevance of the concept of youth

The literature on the subject demonstrates a wide consensus that the characteristics and duration of the transition from childhood to adulthood vary according to society, culture, ethnicity, social class and gender. There is also consensus with regard to the practical necessity of establishing norms for comparing the situation of young people in different contexts and following their evolution through time. The simplest criterion for identifying the youth population is age, which intuitively seems the most appropriate measure as well. Age figures as a variable in the large majority of available sources of periodic data collection, and it does not present major problems concerning data reliability. Using age as an operational definition does not solve the basic problem, however, but rather shifts it to the determination of the most appropriate age limits for apprehending the “essence” of the youth phenomenon. The different approaches encounter several sources of conflict with regard to establishing these age limits; examining the difficulties involved thus serves as a good point of departure for discussing the growing complexity of the youth frontiers.

To the extent that societies develop from rural to urban, from agrarian to industrial and from industrial to technological or information-based, their citizens require an increasingly broad base of abilities, skills and knowledge in order to perform effectively in the society. At the same time, the boundaries of youth are stretching, taking on dimensions never before seen in the history of humanity. The consideration of these changes has not greatly altered the lower limit of the operational definition of youth, even if certain behaviours that were previously associated with adolescents or young adults—especially in the area of consumption of recreational goods and services—currently are manifested at an earlier age. A reasonable consensus holds that the age of entry into adolescence must be determined on the basis of biological and psychological criteria, given that the development of sexual and reproductive functions represents a profound transformation in an individual's physical, biological and psychological dynamics. This transformation clearly differentiates the youth from the child.

Establishing the upper limit of the operational definition of youth, in contrast, raises issues which culminate in doubts about the practical advantages of using age as the central criterion. The primary difficulty has to do with the increasingly diffuse nature of the boundaries between the youth world and the adult world. In the past, entering the adult world implied the temporal convergence of economic, social, cultural and political behaviours modeled on well-established norms of conduct. In that sense, the adult model comprised a set of consistent behaviours determined by work and family roles. The values and rules that regulated those areas complemented each other and reinforced those of other fundamental institutions, like the church and community. Currently, at least two processes are modifying this situation: (1) the sustained increase in the proportion of people who fully participate in the economy while remaining in or continuing to identify with youth culture and (2) the uncertainties associated with entering the working world and forming a family.

The disassociation between productive roles and adult culture is partly explained by the fact that young people in and of themselves now constitute a rapidly growing market for consumer goods and services, many of which are produced by other young people. In addition, however, certain features of modern societies favour elements of youth culture, which are beginning to compete advantageously with elements of adult culture insofar as they orient the habits and behaviours of the general population. These advantages become evident, for example, upon considering that as a result of the institutionalization of change, which is a key process of the modern era, the ability to confront new situations flexibly and to incorporate innovations quickly is more highly valued than before. The growing demand for these skills means, among other things, that adults look to young people to signal appropriate attitudes for facing these transformations. All of this tends to shift the axis of cultural production toward youth.

The blurred boundaries between the youth world and the adult world are further obscured by changes in the meaning of adult roles, which was brought about by growing uncertainty on the job front and transformations in family structure. The precariousness and uncertainty of the labour market—together with the weakening of its institutions— affect the hegemony that the work world traditionally held as the nucleus for the formation of adult identities, and they contribute to the increasing ambiguity of the adult role. A similar effect is felt from the dissolution of the traditional family, the emergence of models of family structure based on nonformalized consensual unions and the greater relative share of unstable, single-parent households. Consequently, a greater proportion of children do not live with their biological fathers.

2. Youth at a paradoxical crossroads

Modern times are clearly marked by the institutionalization of change and the centrality of knowledge as the motor of progress. Both factors place young people in a privileged position for contributing to development...

Globalization and the increasing expansion of competitive frontiers—in the context of the accelerated incorporation of technological innovations— provide an obvious impetus for the potential contribution of young people to the development of their societies. A key factor is the prominent role of knowledge as the driving force behind these transformations and as society's fundamental resource for facing challenges. Adolescence is the stage in the life cycle that is essentially dedicated to acquiring the necessary assets for the satisfactory performance of adult roles. Society therefore grants youth a "moratorium on roles", that is, a temporary suspension of obligations, which favours both the flexibility for adapting to new situations—by experimenting with them and weighing their pros and cons—and the

rapid incorporation of innovations. This process does not meet with resistance in the form of habit and crystallized practices or interests rooted in institutional structures, as usually happens among the adult generations.

Consequently, in an era marked by the “institutionalization of change” and the “centrality of knowledge”, young people come to represent the segment of the population whose working dynamics naturally fall into step with the rhythm of the times. The opposite occurs with the adult population, because the speed of transformations taking place in the productive realm reduces the market value of their accumulated experience and puts their skills in permanent risk of obsolescence. The focus of economic dynamics thus shifts towards the new generation.

... but while the realization of current development styles requires optimal utilization of the type of assets that are concentrated among youth, it paradoxically increases social exclusion among young people.

Paradoxically, youth unemployment is reaching new heights at the world level, despite clear indications that in order for a society to respond successfully to the challenges imposed by the continuous expansion of the competitiveness frontiers, it must be able to mobilize the potentiality of its young people. The explanation behind this paradox lies in the heterogeneity of the youth population and their level of articulation as a corporate actor, on the one hand, and transformations in the demand for labour, on the other.

Heterogeneity appears to be increasing with regard to the assets —especially human and social capital— available to young people situated at different levels in the national stratification systems. If one segment manages to acquire the human and social resources necessary for adapting quickly to new productivity demands, others see their access to such opportunities blocked. This obstacle arises from two factors: first, the demand for this type of competence appears to be building up faster than societies are able to generate them, and second, the weakening of fundamental institutions (such as the family and the community), which is greater among the youth of lower income households, undermines the families’ ability to invest in their children’s education and to complement the schools’ socialization role. Creating conditions that stimulate and promote the ability to defer gratification is essential (see box 1).

Box 1

**MOBILITY THROUGH EDUCATION: THE IMPORTANCE OF MECHANISMS
FOR DEFERRED GRATIFICATION**

In modern society, young people must demonstrate a growing capacity for deferring gratification if they hope to efficiently exploit the existing channels of mobility. This is due to the fact that the thresholds for access to the necessary resources for achieving good occupational positions have risen sharply. The clearest example of this phenomenon is the education system. A recent studies shows that in Montevideo the minimum education level at which the majority of 20- to 30-year-old workers receive sufficient wages for maintaining a small family (a spouse and small child) above the poverty line is 17 years of schooling. (Similar measures for Montevideo in 1981 set the level at nine years of schooling, or the equivalent of finishing the basic secondary cycle.) Keeping a student in the education system for such a long period poses new problems for the social institutions associated with young people; the complexity of these problems varies according to the speed of educational expansion. Financially, the problem involves not only covering the students' daily consumer expenses for a longer period and paying the expenses derived from increasing educational costs, but also compensating somehow for lost income in many cases. The non-financial requirements include the continuity and strength which these families must exhibit in order to transmit values and sustain motivation. Keep in mind that for adolescents to develop the capacity to defer the gratification of their immediate needs until after long-range educational goals have been achieved, they and their parents must all be convinced that the current sacrifices will be adequately compensated by future achievements.

Various processes in modern societies hinder the development of young people's ability to defer gratification. The clear tendencies for family dissolution, as evidenced in statistics on divorce, second and third marriages, illegitimate births and consensual unions, point to a weakening of the family's ability to provide financial and motivational support. Furthermore, the young people themselves are exposed to demands whose satisfaction comes into conflict with the required educational investment. One of these demands is related to the early initiation of sexual activity and the consequent increase in the risk of premature, undesired paternity or maternity, as well as the consolidation of emotional commitments that pressure for leaving home sooner. Another is tied to the constant bombardment from consumer campaigns specifically targeting young people and soliciting immediate gratification.

The belief in the association between effort and achievement is structurally conditioned, and it is distributed differentially along the lines of social stratification. At the poorest levels, the immediacy of survival needs calls for a Band-Aid approach oriented to solving problems as they arise, using the resources available in the moment. Extreme poverty rarely offers the necessary respite for either continued investment or the construction of discipline, which reduces the possibility of an adolescent's having experienced or witnessed success through sustained efforts in any one direction. The weakness or complete absence of association between effort and achievement blocks the development of the ability to defer gratification in those who, by nature of their social position, need it the most.

Source: R. Katzman, "Activos y estructuras de oportunidades. Estudios sobre las raíces de la vulnerabilidad social en el Uruguay" (LC/MVD/R./180), Montevideo, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)/ ECLAC Office in Montevideo, May, 1999.

Another element worth considering is the greater degree of institutional and political articulation seen among the adult generations in comparison with the younger generations. In an environment of growing job insecurity, those segments of the population that act corporatively tend to close ranks around the defense of their achievements and in particular of their market positions. Such actions generate constraints that not only hinder the full utilization of the youth population's human resources but also prevent a higher State investment in developing their skills, with adverse effects for intergenerational equity. Although the problems of intergenerational equity have not been widely investigated in the

countries of the region, they become evident on comparing the relative weight of the poor in the different age groups and the distribution of public social spending (especially with respect to the share of social security and education). Furthermore, the increasing incorporation of women in the labour market, which is transforming a family system based on a single “provider” into one in which both partners earn an income, contributes to raising the levels of competition that young people must face in the job market.

3. Youth and social exclusion: poverty and isolation

Young people’s role in the performance of their society is not limited to their economic contribution. Their participation in social institutions is essential for instilling in them the necessary flexibility for adapting to change and fulfilling their role in biological reproduction and the socialization of new generations.

From a strictly instrumental perspective—which goes beyond the regulatory features that lead to the choice of one development style over another— democratic societies operating under the current global economic conditions must fully utilize their human resources potential if they are to realize objectives for growth. They must also achieve a social order that promotes the coordination of efforts and gives economic actors confidence in the continuity of productive performance. The sustainability of any social order is undoubtedly strengthened by processes of integration based on equity and weakened by processes of exclusion.

Today, working-class urban youth suffer an unprecedented risk of social exclusion.¹ From the market to the State and society, a confluence of forces tends to concentrate poverty among the young and to distance them from the “central course” of the social system. The factors contributing to rising poverty among youth include the following:

(i) The labour market is increasingly unable to absorb low-skills workers and to guarantee coverage of social benefits traditionally tied to the performance of stable jobs, a situation that primarily affects working-class urban youth.

(ii) A range of difficulties are encountered by the State in reforming education and training systems at the same rate at which the demand for new aptitudes and skills is changing.

(iii) Transformations taking place in the family contribute to the poverty of new generations of working-class urban youth because the rising problems of single-parent or unstable families are more frequent at lower income levels. This has strong negative repercussions on the socialization of children, and the scarcity of resources prohibits compensating for the negative effects of such problems. These

¹ Focusing on working-class urban youth is justified for several reasons. First, according to estimates by the Population Division of the ECLAC Latin American and Caribbean Demographic Centre (CELADE), almost 80% of the region’s youth currently resides in urban areas; this concentration coincides with the bulk of poverty. Second, rural-to-urban migration has traditionally represented a preferable option for rural youth seeking to improve their quality of life, and population projections and estimates reveal a progressive shrinking of rural youth populations in favour of growing populations of urban youth. Finally, the situation of working-class urban youth in the region reveals—more intensely and dramatically than any other youth sector—the tensions that are generated by the integration of young people into contemporary societies, as they adjust to the dynamic of the new development styles.

families are rarely able to invest in their children's education or to sustain their children's motivation through time by stimulating them and giving them confidence that efforts invested in the acquisition of knowledge will be rewarded through the achievement of their goals.

(iv) The above factors reinforce the "employment effect" on poverty, because educational insufficiencies together with labour market constraints tend to exclude young people from the best-paying jobs.

(v) A "demographic effect" is also at work: young people who leave home early, with relatively low levels of education, demonstrate higher fertility rates than their peers with higher education levels. This demographic effect contributes to concentrating poverty in the first stages of the family life cycle.

In sum, the poverty found among working-class urban youth appears to follow from insufficient State and family actions, which fail to create favourable conditions for young people to acquire the qualifications and skills necessary for participating in productive structures that incorporate accelerated technological innovations. A second process is also at work, although here it is not easy to identify cause and effect: dropping out of the education system early is usually associated with leaving home early, and these young people display higher fertility rates than do their more educated peers. The result is a demographic effect on the incidence of poverty in this segment of the population.

Alongside the mechanisms that increase poverty among urban youth, several factors accentuate their isolation from other sectors of society. They are related to the following processes:

(i) Residential segregation, which involves the growing spatial concentration of households with similar income levels and which results in the homogeneous social composition of neighbourhoods.

(ii) Separation of public spaces for casual socializing (outside the market), which reduces the frequency of face-to-face encounters between people of different socioeconomic backgrounds.

(iii) Segmentation of basic services, among which the segmentation of education stands out for its importance in citizen formation.

The combined action of these three factors on the situation of working-class urban youth causes their progressive isolation from the central course of the social system, that is, from the people and institutions that conform to the modal norms of society. Such isolation, together with the deterioration of basic institutions for socialization and normative orientation, promotes a growing exposure and susceptibility to the influence of peer groups in the immediate social setting.

Inadequate participation in the education system and precarious entry into the labour force prevent the education and labour systems from operating as transmitters of the norms and values that order daily life, structure aspirations and define goals. Furthermore, the unstable, single-parent families that are prevalent among the poor demonstrate a limited ability to fulfil their socialization roles or to reinforce school functions. Finally, isolation from the central course of society leaves working-class urban youth with no close, visible models of success (attained through effective utilization of the structure of opportunities) that link effort and achievement. This social isolation occurs in the context of a normative void provoked by the deterioration of fundamental institutions, weak and uncertain participation in the education and labour systems and the distancing of models of success that link effort and achievement. Working-class urban youth thus remain marginalized from influences that could offer

them an alternative path toward constructing an identity and that could bolster their self-esteem and sense of belonging to the community. Under these conditions, young people tend to be left to the influences that germinate in the course of daily interaction on neighbourhood streets with youths who share the same characteristics.

What goals and aspirations can young people formulate under such circumstances? This represents another paradox, because the conditions of social exclusion that affect working-class urban youth are accompanied by an unprecedented level of exposure to massive consumer campaigns, which confer on youth culture an equally unprecedented centrality. The result is a situation of structural anomie, in which young people have a relatively high symbolic participation in society, which models their aspirations, and a material participation that impedes their ability to satisfy these aspirations through legitimate channels. The combination of these elements contributes to the formation of marginal subcultures, gangs and bands. These groups generate their own rules and are strongly susceptible to the incorporation of socially disruptive behaviours and habits, such as drug addiction and violence, which emerge from situations of impoverishment and social exclusion. The crystallization of these marginal subcultures not only prevents young people from contributing to the performance of society, but also weakens the social fabric by creating the stigma of a “dangerous class” which motivates political abandonment on the part of the middle classes, erodes the norms for harmonious community relations and ultimately gives rise to a negative synergy that progressively reinforces segregation and social segmentation.

4. Youth and inequity in social and biological reproduction

Youth from different social strata diverge in both their timelines for leaving home and norms of reproductive behaviour, such that the brunt of society’s biological and social reproduction falls on working-class urban youth.

While there are exceptions, youth from different socioeconomic strata demonstrate different timelines for leaving home: the middle and upper sectors of society demonstrate a later pattern featuring lower fertility, while the less well-off experience earlier drop-out rates, teenage pregnancy and higher fertility rates. One segment of the youth population tends to respond to labour market demands for greater accumulated knowledge by prolonging their studies much more than in the past, while another segment, for various reasons, tends to abandon the education system before reaching the necessary thresholds for an effective entry into the labour market. Although these differences vary from country to country, everything indicates that the continuity of the above-mentioned socioeconomic processes will contribute to widening the differences between the two poles.

This polarization has important implications for the sustainability of growth with equity, to the extent that the weight of biological and social reproduction is redistributed among the distinct socioeconomic groups. It is important to bear in mind that despite considerable advances in the education of women, which is reflected in higher matriculation rates and sharp increases in average years of study, the majority of Latin American children are conceived and raised by mothers who have not surpassed primary education and whose level of fertility is generally double that of women with medium and high education levels.

In sum, the poorest segments of the countries in the region carry the brunt of forming new households and, therefore, of biological and social reproduction. In contrast, women who are not

poor —and in particular those that have accumulated sufficient assets that they can reasonably expect access to modern structures of opportunity— postpone leaving their natal home and control their fertility in accordance with their growing economic participation and with the costs of socialization required for offering their children a future that is similar to or better than their own.

Consequently, societies are, to a large extent, depriving themselves of the potential contribution of those who have accumulated the greatest physical, human and social capital resources, as evidenced by the profile of the new generations. At the same time, the majority of children are being raised in households with a relatively low capacity for socialization. Sufficient information is available on these subjects for the region to begin delineating a sociodemographic policy directed at reversing this source of social inequity. As is well known, education is requisite for reducing desired family size and controlling undesired reproduction, and significant advances are underway in this area. Such a proposal must give priority to issues of reproductive and sexual health, which must be based on free decision making on the part of the individual, must be adapted to youth needs and interests and must answer to criteria of social equity.

Stimulating a pattern of biological and social reproduction that is more consistent with improving the social integration of young people and more compatible with the societal objective of growth with greater equity is a complex task, because it is apparently related to redefining the life prospects that working-class urban youth currently envision for themselves. It is necessary to create conditions that facilitate an effective and timely pattern of household formation and entry into the job market, offering certainties about the future that no one can currently guarantee. More than specific sectoral measures, progress in this direction appears to require the generation of a broader awareness of the problem's importance, which should be incorporated as an ever-present theme in the orientation and design of education, employment and housing policies and of policies related to State transfers to households, especially those directed specifically to young people.

B. CHANGES IN YOUTH LIVING CONDITIONS

1. Youth, demographic transition and migration

In the second half of the twentieth century, the percentage of young people (aged 15 to 29 years) as a share of total population peaked in 1990 at 28.5%, although countries demonstrated a wide variation as a result of the heterogeneity of the demographic transition. While decreasing fertility rates will cause this share to drop to 24% in 2020, the absolute size of the youth population will continue to grow in countries featuring a moderate, incipient transition and also —at least in the first decade of the twenty-first century— in those that are already in full transition and that represent the bulk of the regional population. Aside from the effects on the potential demand for social services (basically, education and health), these tendencies carry important challenges for both the productive, creative incorporation of youth and their social, political and cultural participation (see box 2).

Box 2

YOUTH AND THE DEMOGRAPHIC CONTEXT

In the initial stages of demographic transition, especially during the period of declining fertility, young people came of age in societies which, as a whole, were also remarkably young. Thus, whereas 50% of the regional population was under the age of 19 in 1970, in 2000 the median age was nearly 25. In the future, the continuing decline in fertility rates will be felt in an accelerated demographic aging: the median age of the population will climb sharply to over 30 in 2020 and will approach 40 in 2050. The number of youth (aged 15 to 29) for every 100 adults (aged 30 to 64) will fall from 80 in 2000 to 56 in 2020 and to 46 in 2050. The relation between youth and seniors (aged 65 and older) will fall even more dramatically: from 520 youth for every 100 seniors in 2000 to 290 in 2020 and to just 80 in 2050. The progression of the demographic transition will be such that young people will find their environment predominated by adults and seniors, with a continually decreasing share of children. These deep changes in the demographic context can influence behavioural expectations and demands with regard to youth performance. It is possible that in virtue of their higher degree of qualification and their potential for assimilating innovations, youth will assume a protagonistic role in society, although it is also probable that they will tend to emulate adult behaviour. An alternative hypothesis is that changes in the labour market (and its greater requirements for knowledge) combined with the relative scarcity of young people will extend the period of transition to adult life.

Source: ECLAC/CELADE (Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, Latin American and Caribbean Demographic Centre – Population Division), Youth, population and development in Latin America and the Caribbean (LC/L.1339), Santiago, Chile, March 2000.

The substantial relative weight of the youth population raises various questions regarding the advantages and disadvantages of the situation. While such an analysis should take into account both the characteristics of that population segment and the attributes of the national structures of opportunity, any evaluation will reflect the value judgements of the actors who carry it out. When faced with societies characterized by relatively closed social structures and labour markets featuring scarce possibilities for absorbing the workforce, some actors will interpret such a high relative weight of the youth population as a threat to their stability; it is possible they will conceive of international migration as an escape valve for the social tensions generated by youth who are frustrated in their aspirations for social mobility. In contrast, other actors will evaluate that share as a possibility for renovating lapsed structures and incorporating greater flexibility and up-to-date knowledge in institutional performance; this is the equivalent of opening a “demographic window of opportunity” associated with improving the debt-equity ratio.

Young people react differently to what they perceive as an absence of options for improving their welfare. One possible reaction is to abandon their home of origin in search of a more favourable context; the cities have been the favourite destination for youth, as evidenced by the rapid urbanization that the countries of the region have experienced in recent decades. Motivated by opportunities for access to training, employment, services and diverse forms of recreation —and also by the possibility of faster, more direct contact with the technological transformations that are taking the world by storm— young people have become concentrated in the region’s urban centres, where 80% of youth now reside. In several countries with expanding internal frontiers (including Bolivia, Brazil, Ecuador, Guatemala and Mexico), some youth —mostly men— are attracted by the opportunities these frontiers represent, and they become pioneer settlers; however, the available information leads one to suspect that these

“colonization” settlements are relatively unstable. In contrast, the city’s attraction is more permanent, especially for young women. While migration to the demographically larger cities has been declining over the years, the intermediate urban centres have become increasingly important alternatives for the location of youth populations.

A smaller percentage of Latin American and Caribbean youth migrate beyond the borders of their countries, most often to neighbouring countries. These movements undoubtedly constitute an important signal for Governments with regard to the limits of the national structures of opportunity in comparison to the opportunities offered by other countries. Analysing the emigrant profile can help to identify the population segments that are most affected by relative national shortcomings (see box 3). Thus the predominance of those who leave in search of employment, better salaries or better skills (or knowledge) will indicate the relative weight in national shortcomings of employment opportunities, income levels or the education system, respectively. Taken as a whole, international migration of Latin American youth has stayed within strict margins: in 1990 a little more than 2% of the Latin American and Caribbean population aged 15 to 24 years lived outside their native country. The absolute number of immigrants, however, was 35% greater than that registered a decade earlier. Almost all of this increase was absorbed by the United States, where the number of young people native to the region virtually doubled.

Box 3

THE NEED TO IMPROVE DATA ON INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION

Despite important advances in the utilization of census data, one of the most serious problems for understanding regional phenomena of international migration is the difficulty of following population flows. In an increasingly globalized world, all signs indicate that labour mobility will continue to grow and the search for better qualifications will extend across national borders. Investing in the improvement of data sources is therefore indispensable. As flows among countries become heavier and more varied, it will be necessary to enhance the content of those sources with new variables that improve the reliability and timeliness of qualitative data on international population movements. Such measures are a crucial requisite for laying the foundations for intergovernmental policy with respect to these issues.

Source: ECLAC/CELADE (Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, Latin American and Caribbean Demographic Centre – Population Division), Youth, population and development in Latin America and the Caribbean (LC/L.1339), Santiago, Chile, March 2000.

2. The elusiveness of progress in education

The growing centrality of knowledge in the transformation of productive structures directly links young people’s educational achievements with their welfare prospects. Beyond the virtual universalization of primary education, statistics on the evolution of secondary and tertiary school coverage over the last 30 years give occasion for moderate optimism. Youth human resources underwent a sustained increase, and the labour market simultaneously registered a steady rise in the hiring thresholds for jobs that previously imposed lower requirements. Although this change produces a devaluation of education—in the sense of reducing remuneration of individuals with similar educational achievements—the incorporation of a more qualified workforce with higher formal schooling contributed to increasing the productivity of the

economy. Educational advances also allowed young men and women to exert greater rationality in decisions about their future, and it is reasonable to attribute the generalized drop in fertility rates, at least in part, to such advances.

Despite these signs of progress, other factors tend to diminish enthusiasm. First, despite the expansion of educational coverage, the majority of the countries in the region did not manage to reduce poverty below 1980 levels. Furthermore, the incidence of poverty continues to be higher in the early stages of the life cycle; this is clearly the case among households headed by young people, who should be the principal beneficiaries of these processes. Part of the explanation of this divergence lies in the sustained increase in the educational levels required for gaining access to employment. At the same time, prevailing incomes offer only a reasonable chance of maintaining a small family (i.e., a spouse and one or two children) above the poverty line. In other words, greater educational achievements appear to have been effective in increasing rationality in reproductive decisions, thereby stimulating a consistent reduction in fertility rates. The mere reduction in the number of children born to poor households has not been sufficient for escaping poverty, however, despite a higher degree of educational achievement by the parents. The tremendous expansion of education and the considerable drop in fertility rates have been unable to lift the heavy societal mortgage that poverty represents in vast segments of the region's population.

The second factor inducing a degree of pessimism with respect to the contribution of educational progress for the current and future welfare of the region's youth is the qualitative differences in education. Extending education to the masses went hand in hand with a reduction in the quality of its results. Maintaining this quality would have required not only an increase in public spending that was in step with the broadening of coverage, but also the provision of additional resources for addressing the new task of educating adolescents and young adults from lower income households. These young people arrived at school with a legacy of habits and a deficiency of knowledge in comparison to previous generations of students, the majority of whom —by nature of their socioeconomic origins— had access to an accumulation of assets that complemented educational efforts (see box 4).

Box 4

EDUCATIONAL QUALITY AND SEGMENTATION

The deterioration in the quality of public education motivated broad sectors of the population to abandon the public system, turning instead to the market (through private educational establishments) to provide their children with the knowledge and training necessary for a future compatible with the new conditions of the economy. The consequent segmentation of education had, and continues to have, at least two serious consequences. First, it deprives the public education system of the interest and direct support of those who have a "voice" in society, which contributes to widening the gap in educational quality. Second, it deprives students from households with scarce resources of the opportunity for daily contact with their peers from the middle and upper social strata, under conditions of equality. Such contact promotes greater learning, through the exchange of information among students with distinct experiences and knowledge. They provide a unique opportunity for students from households characterized by a poor educational and cultural climate to adopt from their more privileged peers a degree of discipline for work, good study habits, hopes for mobility and motivation for building a future. These attitudes and behaviours form part of a syndrome, whose positive effects are seen, for example, in the "normality" with which youth from the middle strata perceive university studies as a "natural" continuation of secondary studies.

Source: ECLAC/CELADE (Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, Latin American and Caribbean Demographic Centre – Population Division), Youth, population and development in Latin America and the Caribbean (LC/L.1339), Santiago, Chile, March 2000.

As public opinion draws attention to the qualitative differences in the achievements of parallel but segmented educational trends and the inequality of the economic returns associated with them, the stratification of educational paths becomes increasingly visible. This perception increases the frustration experienced by young people who receive a devalued public education, and it discourages later investment in the acquisition of knowledge. Strictly speaking, the consolidation of trends toward segmented channels of education can represent a challenge to the legitimacy of the means that society proposes for integrating its citizens and improving their welfare. Although such problems pertain to the toughest areas of social policy, an examination of the content and progress of some of the educational reforms that are being implemented in the region gives reason to hope that these processes might be halted and, eventually, reversed.

3. Job insecurity among youth

Over the last twenty years, employment in the region has undergone transformations characterized by increasing job insecurity. According to data from the International Labour Organization (ILO), six out of ten new jobs created in the 1990s corresponded to the informal sector, with the remaining four pertaining to the modern sector. In response to restrictions imposed by fiscal reforms, the State drastically reduced its role in absorbing the workforce and did not generate jobs in that decade, which aggravated youth unemployment (see box 5).

Box 5

UNEMPLOYMENT AND INEQUALITY AMONG YOUTH

It is generally agreed that the availability of stable, high-quality employment is a fundamental dimension of life. Existing data show that unemployment and underemployment in the region are structurally higher among women and youth. In the majority of the countries, youth unemployment is double the rate of total unemployment and triple that of adult unemployment. These ratios have held steady for a long time, and they have not changed significantly during periods of economic expansion or contraction, although they vary by social strata.

In *Social Panorama for Latin America, 1998*, youth unemployment is analysed by household income level. During the period 1990-1997, "...the ratio between the [unemployment] rates in the poorest and richest quartiles has increased in 8 out of 12 countries studied.... This ratio underscores the fact that the burden of unemployment is falling mainly on these vulnerable groups.... unemployment among young people who do not attend school is highest among those from low-income households" (ECLAC, 1998).

Data from household surveys in 15 countries show that youth (aged 15 to 24) who neither study nor work represent between 12% and 40% in poor households and between 2% and 10% in the richest households. Furthermore, youth who do not attend school and have at least ten years of education —the minimum level for gaining access to urban jobs that involve levels of productivity and remuneration associated with acceptable welfare conditions— constitute between 38% and 82% of the total in households from the poorest quartile.

Source: ECLAC, *Social Panorama for Latin America, 1998*, (LC/G.2050-P), Santiago, Chile, May 1998. United Nations publication, Sales No. E.99.II.G.4.

Despite well-publicized advances in formal training, young people were seriously affected by these changes, and their hopes for attaining stable jobs with social security benefits fell in the face of growing unemployment and the expansion of the informal sector. With no possibility of articulating an organized defense or generational demands, an important segment of the youth population prolonged their dependence in their natal homes, collaborated on survival strategies, entered the labour market intermittently via short-term contracts and took refuge in the company of peers who were similarly affected, thereby postponing —seemingly indefinitely— their aspirations and hopes for assuming adult roles.

To the extent that the countries of the region took part in globalization, which expanded the frontiers of competition, they had to take charge of processes of flexibilization in the use of their primary resources, to which end they promoted educational reforms and worked toward consolidating efficient training systems. They trusted that this would generate favourable conditions for providing young people with useful tools to help them perform in a world in which the only constant appears to be the acceleration of change. Given that the application of these initiatives is very recent, and that there is a wide consensus that these are slow, long-range processes, a thorough evaluation of the results would be premature. Meanwhile, all countries, including developed countries, face the difficult task of finding roads that allow them to dissociate the flexibility necessary for market liberalization from its negative consequences for job security.

C. YOUTH, REPRODUCTION AND EQUITY

1. The importance of reproductive trends for individuals, couples and society

Most individuals manage to develop a reproductive history that, while it achieves its clearest manifestation in the birth of a child, encompasses various components related to sexual behaviour; marriage decisions; birth control methods; illnesses or injuries associated with sexual activity or pregnancy and birth; and fertility. Reproductive trends reflect biological limits —which are sharper in the case of women, who are subject to obvious milestones marking the beginning (menarche) and end (menopause) of their reproductive potential— both because procreation can only occur during a specific phase of the life cycle and because it requires a basic, underlying degree of physiological fitness.

Within the limits imposed by biological factors, the course of reproductive development is affected by very diverse economic, psychosocial and cultural forces. These include (i) individual sentiments and desires; (ii) personal reasoning with respect to the costs and benefits of specific decisions; (iii) sociocultural definitions of what is acceptable, censurable and sanctionable; and (iv) the material options available for exercising some control over reproduction and their eventual health consequences. These forces determine both the development of the specific components of reproductive trends and the timing and form of key milestones, such as (i) the start of sexual relations; (ii) the formation and break-up of unions; (iii) the use of procedures (whether norms of conduct or specially designed means) to control fertility and to avoid the health risks associated with sexual activity and birth; and (iv) the timing and degree of fertility.

Given the eminently social nature of reproduction, reproductive trends are shaped through behaviour —which may represent a conscious decision or which sometimes just “happens”— in the areas

of sexuality, marriage, contraception and fertility. Each behaviour entails specific risks for physical or mental health. In addition, it is increasingly recognized that individuals and couples have the right to freely make informed decisions on behaviours that shape their reproductive experience (Langer and others, 1999). This factor is crucial, because decisions regarding reproduction are among the most relevant that people make; they constitute one of the principal threads running through the course of their lives, although relations between reproductive trends and plans for the future are not necessarily harmonious. Thus, the degree of control that individuals exercise in the area of reproduction represents the exercise of their reproductive rights and reveals their capacity for functionally integrating their reproductive potential into the plans they have formulated for their lives.

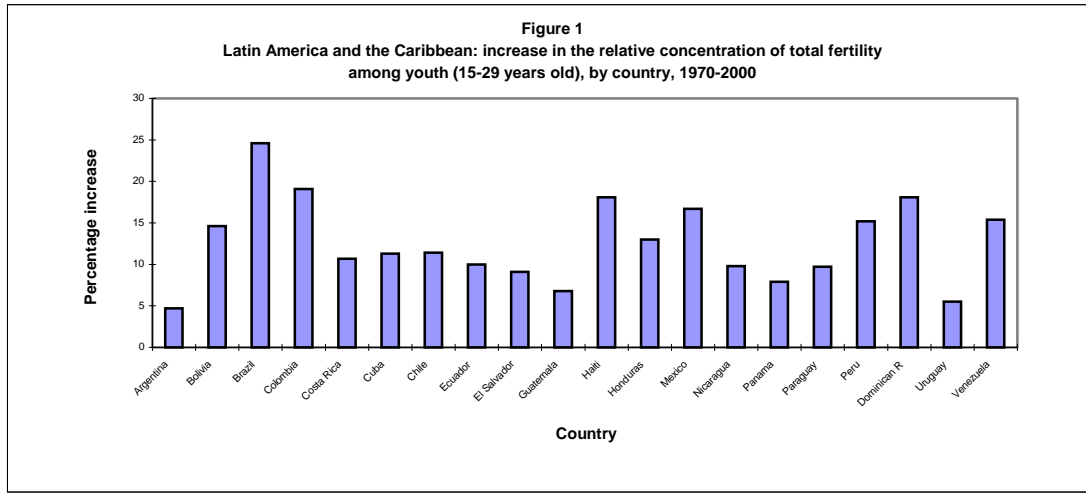
Biological reproduction is relevant not only for individuals, but also for society as a whole, because it constitutes the only force capable of prolonging society's existence beyond that of its members.² The specific implications for each community include demographic dynamics; group renovation and replacement; and increased demand for goods and services. Because biological reproduction represents the exclusive mechanism for collective survival, however, individual decisions in this area have important ramifications at the social level. This can lead to conflicts between the expectations, hopes and options of individuals (and couples) and those of society, whether as a result of very high or very low levels of biological reproduction. Policy design related to reproduction must therefore take into account both the individual and collective levels, since the two perspectives generally encompass different and sometimes conflicting values with regard to reproductive decisions.

2. Youth and reproduction: principal characteristics

The above observations on reproductive trends clearly apply to the realities of Latin American and Caribbean youth. First, a significant percentage of biological reproduction —60% or higher— occurs when people are young. The reproductive decisions that young people make thus determine their lifetime fertility rates. Similarly, the reproductive decisions of youth will shape the demographic future of the countries of the region, especially given that throughout the region the relative weight of youth fertility rates as a share of total fertility has increased in the last 30 years (see figure 1).³

² In the case of specific communities, immigration is another process that can allow persistence through time, although migration cannot fulfil such a role at the level of the global community.

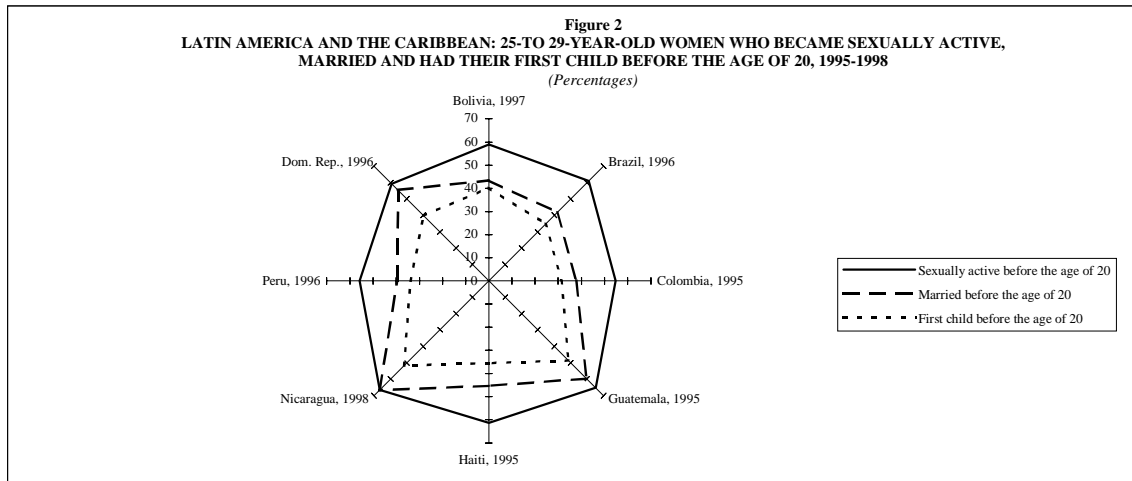
³ This phenomenon is typical of demographic transition processes in that fertility rates drop faster among women aged 30 years and older. As the recent European experience illustrates, however, this tendency can undergo reversals. In the context of the so-called second demographic transition (Lesthaeghe, 1998 and 1995), European women —and also women in certain industrialized Asian countries— have significantly delayed the age at which they form unions and, consequently, the age at which they have their first child (Schoenmaeckers and Lodewijckx, 1999). In some cases this has resulted in a relative —and in some countries absolute— rise in fertility between 30 and 34 years of age (United Nations, 1998).



Source: CELADE, on the basis of current population estimates and projections.

Second, the spaces for functionally integrating reproductive experiences into individual life plans are more restricted during youth than during adulthood, because young people are in the midst of constructing of their futures —or laying their foundations, if you will— through the accumulation of assets, resources, human capital and experience. In later stages of the life cycle, plans for the future are largely defined and even relatively advanced, such that individuals can clearly identify the compatibility of reproductive options with their plans.

Third, the most significant milestones in personal reproductive histories usually occur during youth. Not only do most births occur between the ages of 15 and 29, but this is also the period when most people initiate sexual activity, are exposed to the risk of contracting sexually transmitted diseases, including acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS), form their first stable union, and learn about and start to use contraceptive methods. The available data for the region indicate that by the age of 20, the majority of women are sexually active, slightly less than half have formed stable unions and over a third are mothers (see figure 2).



Source: CELADE, on the basis of the Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) database.

Fourth, young people usually reach the reproductive milestones mentioned above under adverse conditions, due to the conjunction of two factors. First is inexperience, which is attributable to their condition as neophytes who have only recently been initiated into sexual and reproductive matters, as well as to the degree of psychological and emotional maturity, especially in the case of adolescents. This inexperience makes their reproductive behaviour more risky: pregnancies can result from hasty decisions, and ignorance about prevention can lead to the contraction of venereal diseases. The second factor arises from the set of societal norms and values that negatively sanctions reproductive activity among adolescents and young adults, in particular if it occurs outside of marriage or a consensual union. Therefore, teenagers usually hide their sexual activity from their elders, and they frequently have no access to means of birth control or to prophylactic devices for the prevention of venereal disease, which increases the “risk” of their sexual and reproductive behaviour.

Finally, during youth, more than any other stage in the life cycle, individuals experience a constant tension between their condition as the community’s “providers” of biological reproduction and the growing pressures that society imposes for lengthening the period exclusively dedicated to the acquisition of knowledge, skill development and the acquisition of experience. In addition, adolescents find themselves subjected to conflicting forces: increasing exposure to messages that stimulate the exercise of sexuality not associated with procreation versus wide-ranging social prohibitions which tend to negate their condition as sexually active beings and block their access to reproductive health services. A significant group of sexually active adolescents thus lacks access to information, education and sexual and reproductive health services (see table 1), which hinders their ability to exercise their reproductive rights and violates their physiological integrity and life projections (see box 6). In fact, the sharp differences in the reproductive trends of Latin American versus western European teenagers are not centred on the initiation of sexual activity, but rather the early age at which reproduction begins. While no less than 15% of 18- and 19-year-old Latin American and Caribbean girls became mothers before the age of 18, data from the Fertility and Family Surveys undertaken by the Economic Commission for

Europe (ECE) and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) indicate that in the countries of western Europe, this figure is under 5% (see figure 3).

Table 1

**LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN: TEENAGE GIRLS (15-19 YEARS OLD)
WHO USE CONTRACEPTION, BY COUNTRY, 1987-1998**

(Percentages)

Country and year of survey	Total	Married	Singles, sexually active
Belize (1991)	..	26.2	..
Bolivia (1998)	5.1	31.1	63.5
Brazil (1996)	14.8	54.0	65.9
Colombia (1995)	10.9	50.9	67.0
Costa Rica (1990)	2.6	52.0	66.0
Dominican Republic (1996)	10.1	35.1	57.7
Ecuador (1988)	3.0	15.3	..
El Salvador (1994)	..	22.5	..
Guatemala (1995)	2.8	12.1	41.7
Guyana (1992)	..	18.1	..
Haiti (1995)	3.6	10.5	24.3
Honduras (1996)	..	27.6	..
Jamaica (1993)	29.3	58.8	..
Mexico (1996)	7.7	43.5	..
Nicaragua (1998)	11.3	39.9	23.7
Paraguay (1998)	..	47.1	..
Peru (1996)	7.5	46.0	69.8
Suriname (1992)	..	29.6	..
Trinidad and Tobago (1987)	9.7	42.4	42.9
Venezuela (1998)	10.3	59.6	40.0

Source: J. Guzmán, R. Hakkert and J. Contreras, "Salud reproductiva de los adolescentes en América Latina y el Caribe", Mexico City, United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) support team, Office for Latin America and the Caribbean, unpublished, 2000.

(..) Not available.

Box 6

**NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES OF TEENAGE PREGNANCY FOR MOTHERS,
CHILDREN AND SOCIETY**

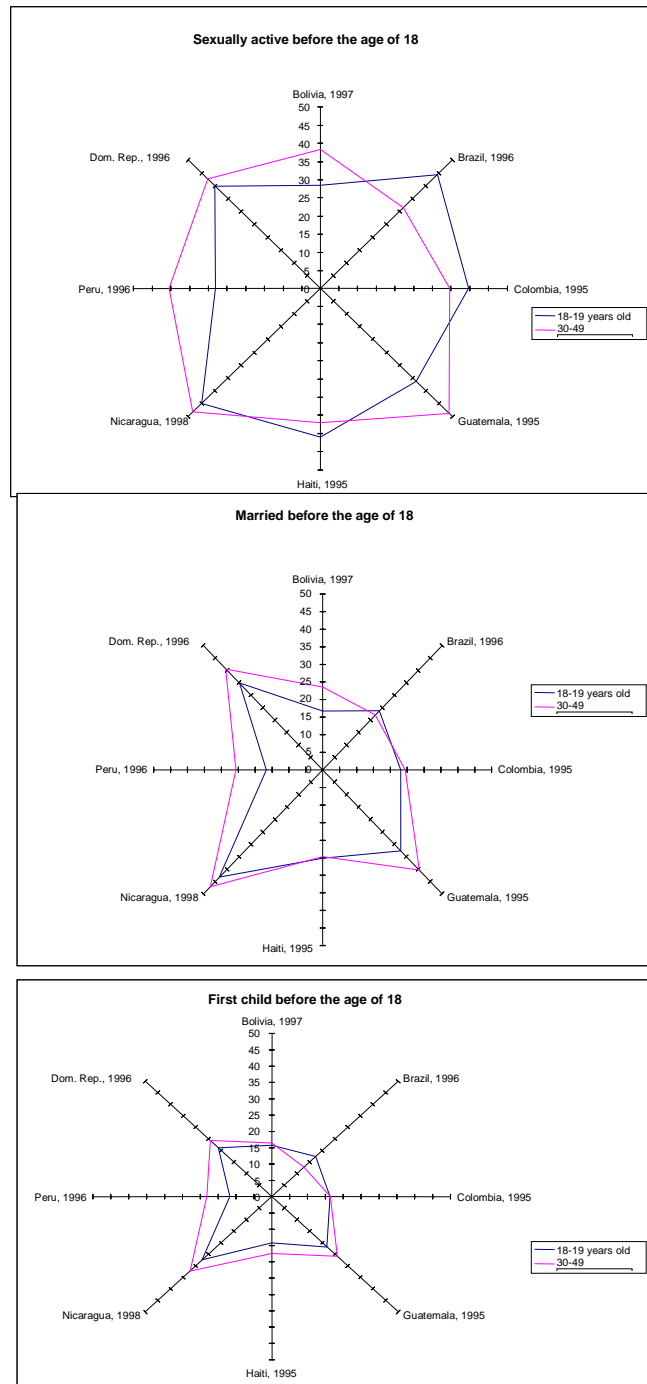
Risks for the mothers: Early maternity hinders the accumulation of assets in human and social capital which are necessary for maintaining reasonable hopes for social mobility, primarily because it triggers withdrawal from school and significantly reduces the time available for formative activities. When it occurs at very young ages (in particular, under 17), teenage pregnancy carries health risks associated with a low physiological maturity (Langer and others, 1999). Adolescent pregnancy usually confines the mothers to domestic activities and forces the fathers to enter the work world under precarious conditions. This impaired education and entry into the labour force also has consequences for the accumulation of assets in social capital. Dropping out of educational establishments and the weakness or complete lack of work experience deprives adolescent mothers of links with networks of people who can fulfil an important role in providing information and contacts that facilitate access to the labour market and increase the possibility of obtaining a good job (Katzman, 1999).

Risks for the children: Early maternity is one of the key links in mechanisms for the intergenerational reproduction of poverty, since the development of the children's educational and social capital largely depends on the greater or lesser assets of the parents. Adolescent fertility is associated with high total fertility at the end of the fertile cycle, which means that the children born during the adolescent years frequently have to share the household's usually scarce resources of time, space and money with various other children (Desai, 1995). Teenage mothers are more likely to be single parents, which constitutes another basic disadvantage for the children.

Risks for society: With early maternity, society not only loses the potential human resources of the mother and her children, but also has to invest additional resources in the educational system in order to compensate for the incapacity of those households to complement school efforts (Katzman, 1999).

Source: ECLAC/CELADE (Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, Latin American and Caribbean Demographic Centre – Population Division), Youth, population and development in Latin America and the Caribbean (LC/L.1339), Santiago, Chile, March 2000.

Figure 3
LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN: COMPARISON OF THE MANIFESTATION OF THE REPRODUCTIVE TRIAD BEFORE THE AGE OF 18 FOR 18 – TO 19-YEAR-OLD WOMEN AND 30 – TO 49-YEAR-OLD WOMEN, 1995-1998
(Percentages)



Source: CELADE, on the basis of the Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) database.

3. Youth and reproduction: primary trends in Latin America and the Caribbean

Despite the growing concentration of fertility among youth, evidence shows that youth fertility rates have tended to fall in the last 30 years, as part of the generalized drop in total regional fertility rates. This leads to the conclusion that the new generations have access to greater options for harmonizing their planned futures with their reproductive experience. This encouraging sign in the area of exercising reproductive rights, however, is offset by the proportion of young people who—as a result of social pressures and demands—cannot realize their reproductive aspirations (ECLAC/CELADE, 1998). Many young people in the region claim to want two or three children—this figure is fairly uniform both within and among countries—but as reflected in the trends toward falling fertility mentioned above, many do not achieve this number.⁴

Teenage pregnancy continues to be a source of concern, both because the rates have been more resistant to declining (and have even registered rises with variable duration by country) and because the experience entails significant difficulties for the children, the young parents and their families (see box 6). One hypothesis put forth to explain these stubbornly high adolescent fertility rates attributes them to society's growing sexual permissiveness. Empirical evidence is ambiguous on this issue: while there are signs of greater sexual openness—many of which are qualitative, such as the more explicit treatment of sexual topics in the media or within the family and the relaxing of sanctions for certain sexual behaviours—the data indicate that in most of the countries of the region, adolescent girls currently become sexually active, marry and have their first child later than their mothers did. This paradox stems from a qualitative shift: the early sexual initiation of the past—during the incipient stages of demographic transition—were linked to early marriage and biological reproduction, whereas the delay in becoming sexually active seen in recent decades is due to the postponing of marriage.

Figure 3 provides additional empirical data for the analysis of these tendencies. With the exception of Brazil, where teenage pregnancy has increased in recent decades, the percentage of women that married and had their first child before the age of 18 is lower among the younger population, which signals the postponing of marriage and biological reproduction discussed above.⁵ The same does not occur with the start of sexual activity. In several countries (namely, Brazil, Colombia and Haiti) a higher proportion of adolescents became sexually active before the age of 18, in comparison to the 30- to 49-year-old group. Postponing marriage thus correlates with delays in the initiation of sexual activity in some countries, while in others it appears to facilitate pre-marital sexual initiation, which can occur at even younger ages than in the past.

⁴ A comparison between reproductive preferences (declared number of desired children) and accumulated births (number of children born at specific ages) does not generate conclusive evidence in the case of youth, except when the number of births before the age of 30 exceeds reproductive aspirations. Obviously, a 30-year-old woman still has plenty of “reproductive time” to achieve her goals, and actual fertility rates could still exceed desired rates. The fact that observed fertility rates are inferior to desired rates does not appear to be peculiar to the region, as it has also been observed in several European countries. Furthermore, one could argue that this gap in desired versus actual fertility rates does not imply the same violation of reproductive rights as does exceeding the desired number of children.

⁵ This can be easily seen in the figure: the curve for the 18- to 19-year-old population falls inside the curve for the 30- to 49-year-old population.

The circular form of the graphs in figure 3 clearly represents the following two points:

(1) The initiation of sexual activity before the age of 18 is not related to society's stage of demographic transition; this holds for both the older group and the adolescents. In particular, countries that are well into the transitional process (Brazil and Colombia) demonstrate a much higher percentage of girls who become sexually active before the age of 18 than do countries that are in the early stages of transition (Bolivia and Haiti).

(2) The demographic transition is more clearly evident in the panels showing marriage and the start of reproduction. Youth in the countries that are further along in the transition do not manifest these behaviours early. In contrast, the countries that are further behind in the transitional process do register early marriage and reproduction. However, the graphs support the conclusion that the triad of milestones is broadly independent of a woman's final fertility: some countries with high fertility (Bolivia and Haiti) feature significantly later initiation of sexual activity, marriage and reproduction, while others with lower final fertility have early initiations (Dominican Republic). In sum, specific sociocultural forces appear to delay or move up the triad in each country, independent of socioeconomic development or the stage of demographic transition.

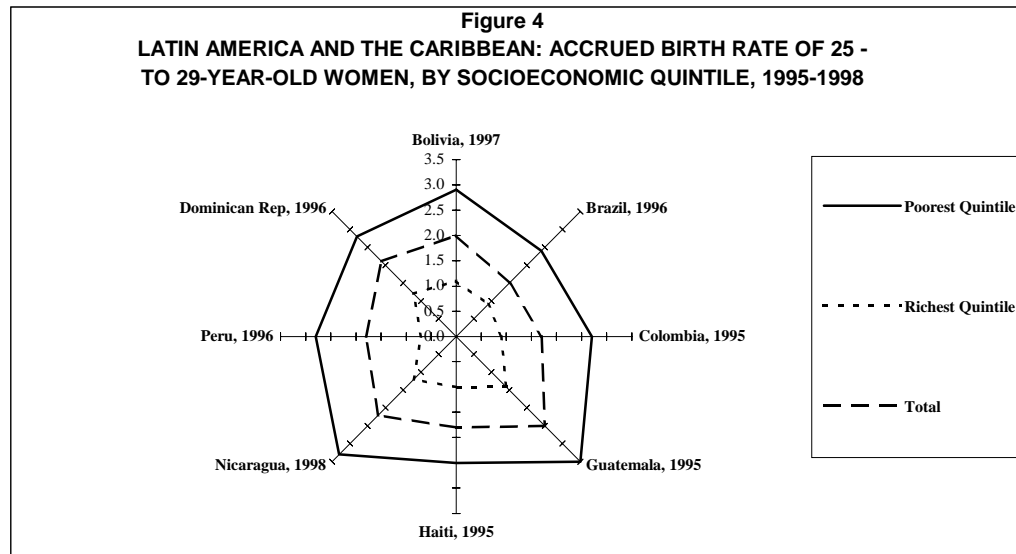
It is worth pointing out that despite all the evidence and reasoning with respect to the negative consequences of early fertility (see box 6), available information indicates that the children of adolescent mothers present the highest "desirability" indices, that is, they do not describe their pregnancies as unwanted. Although this phenomenon has demographic explanations—it basically has to do with first order births, which are rarely declared "undesired"—it is possible that the "desire" is a response to deeper forces, such as the girls' longing to gain status within the family, their need to forge a separate identity, intentions of leaving home via marriage (which would take place as a result of the pregnancy) and the general lack of opportunities which makes maternity their only visible plan for the future. If these are in fact the forces that trigger adolescent fertility (and even a portion of youth fertility), the challenge for public policy becomes even greater, because sexual and reproductive health programmes alone cannot resolve the problems of identity formation, longing for independence and the lack of opportunities available for teenagers and youth.

4. Youth and reproduction: signs of macro- and microsocial inequity

The bulk of responsibility for the biological reproduction of the region's nations falls on youth from the most underprivileged segments of the population; youth from the more advantaged social groups have systematically reduced their participation. Such division of labour, which arises from individual reasoning and social incentives, entails a net loss of the socialization capacity of the community as a whole. It is advisable, therefore, to adopt measures aimed at avoiding further deterioration with regard to the polarization of the reproductive share of socioeconomic sectors.

The empirical evidence is striking. The reproductive trends of young people from different socioeconomic spheres are markedly divergent, and they imply additional disadvantages for those who pertain to groups that are worse off. These disparities are clearly present in both the final and early stages of youth. In the final stages, the poorest young women have significantly more children than their country's national average and very significantly more than their counterparts in the highest socioeconomic quintile (see figure 4). This difference in birth rates means that young women from the higher social strata have a much lower child-rearing burden than do young women in the lower strata;

they therefore have more time and options for accruing assets or pursuing personal fulfilment. Equally important, in all of the countries analysed, poor women aged 25 to 29 had more than two or often more than three children at the time of the survey. Ensuring their adequate upbringing demands tremendous dedication and resources, and it is thus extremely difficult for poor households to achieve.



Source: CELADE, on the basis of the Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) database.

Another facet of reproductive behaviour that demonstrates a wide socioeconomic gap in the early stages of youth but then drops among adults is reproductive experience, which distinguishes women who have had children from those who have not. The proportion of teenage mothers in the disadvantaged groups (that is, girls from poor households, with low levels of education) is much higher than in households with high socioeconomic or education levels. Among adult women over 30, in contrast, 90% or more have had children regardless of socioeconomic conditions (see table 2). This is not surprising, given that the overall decline in fertility rates associated with the demographic transition stems from the reduction of high individual birth rates, not from an increased share of childless women. The relevance of the statistic lies in its confirmation that early child bearing constitutes a factor in socioeconomic differentiation, one that is capable of reinforcing the initial poverty of girls who have children at a young age.

Table 2
LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN: 15-TO 49-YEAR-OLD WOMEN WITH REPRODUCTIVE EXPERIENCE,
BY SOCIOECONOMIC AND AGE GROUPS, 1995-1998

Country and socioeconomic group	Age group						Country and socioeconomic group	Age group					
Bolivia, 1997	15-17	18-19	20-24	25-29	30 and up	Total	Haiti 1995	15-17	18-19	20-24	25-29	30 and up	Total
Rural	12.6	38.8	76.7	91.6	95.5	78	Rural	8.3	32.2	61.1	87.1	95.6	70.2
Urban	5.4	21.1	50.5	80.6	94	64.4	Urban	6.4	22	42.9	70.2	89	55.9
Poorest quintile	18.7	46.2	80.5	93	96	80.6	Poorest quintile	8.2	44.4	75.8	94.4	97.3	79
Richest quintile	2.2	10.3	28.5	67.2	91	55.6	Richest quintile	4.2	8.8	30	61.1	85.2	46.6
Less than 6 years education	19.2	48.9	79.8	94.7	96.3	85.9	Less than 6 years education	8.4	35.8	67.3	88	94.4	72.3
10 or more years education	1.8	7.5	32.7	67.3	89.6	59.3	10 or more years education	5	6.5	20.1	46.2	77.9	35.9
Total	7.1	25.3	56.9	83.7	94.5	68.2	Total	7.4	27	52.3	79.2	93.1	64
Brazil, 1996	15-17	18-19	20-24	25-29	30 and up	Total	Nicaragua, 1998	15-17	18-19	20-24	25-29	30 and up	Total
Rural	15.6	41	60.1	85.8	92.6	72.7	Rural	23.5	53.5	79.3	91.3	96.1	76.6
Urban	10.4	27.1	50.8	73.3	89.8	67.2	Urban	15.5	35.4	64.7	82	94.6	70.4
Poorest quintile	22	54.3	73.7	89	95	77.1	Poorest quintile	27.9	61.5	87.2	94.2	97.8	81.3
Richest quintile	7	10.8	32.2	59.3	88.6	62.8	Richest quintile	7.9	25.7	49	70.3	93.2	64.5
Less than 6 years education	17.7	49.2	69.1	87.1	94.2	80.2	Less than 6 years education	31	67.5	84.6	92.3	96.9	84.2
10 or more years education	1.4	7.5	25	55.3	81.3	56.4	10 or more years of education	3.7	12.2	40	67.4	90.3	59.2
Total	11.5	29.6	52.5	75.3	90.3	68.2	Total	18.5	41.8	69.9	90.3	95.1	72.6
Colombia, 1995	15-17	18-19	20-24	25-29	30 and up	Total	Peru, 1996	15-17	18-19	20-24	25-29	30 and up	Total
Rural	15.2	44.7	74.2	88.3	93.6	76.3	Rural	15	45.5	76.8	90.3	96.8	78
Urban	7	27.5	54.1	76.4	88.7	66.2	Urban	4.5	16.9	47.5	72.3	91.8	62.6
Poorest quintile	18.5	53.8	80.5	91.9	94.8	79	Poorest quintile	19.2	55.7	82.7	93.3	97.2	81.3
Richest quintile	2.5	9.6	37.2	63.5	82.2	58.4	Richest quintile	0.8	6.5	26.3	50.3	86.2	51.9
Less than 6 years education	16.4	53.9	80.1	91.2	93.9	82.5	Less than 6 years education	17.8	51.6	80.1	92.8	97.5	85.3
10 or more years education	3.2	12.1	34.6	63.7	81.4	55.6	10 or more years education	2.5	9.8	37.3	63.4	86.5	58.9
Total	9.2	31.7	59.2	79.2	90	68.8	Total	7.3	23.5	54.7	77.3	93.2	66.7
Guatemala, 1995	15-17	18-19	20-24	25-29	30 and up	Total	Dominican Rep., 1996	15-17	18-19	20-24	25-29	30 and up	Total
Rural	14.4	46.3	72.4	88.4	96.1	74.2	Rural	21.31	45.5	76.1	89.5	96.2	76.7
Urban	8	27.4	61	83.7	93.9	67.6	Urban	10.6	29.7	54.7	78.3	91.9	67.2
Poorest quintile	21.5	53.5	84.4	94.4	97.2	81.5	Poorest quintile	30.2	60.6	90.2	93.4	98.9	82.9
Richest quintile	5.8	22	43.7	73.7	93.9	62.1	Richest quintile	3.3	15.4	35.4	64.3	87.3	57.1
Less than 6 years education	18.5	51.9	79.3	91	96	79.8	Less than 6 years education	28.7	70.1	90.1	94.2	97	86.5
10 or more years education	2	8.8	30.6	70.9	91	56.6	10 or more years education	5.4	15.4	38.6	68.8	86.7	58.7
Total	11.5	38.2	67.6	86.5	95.1	71.3	Total	14.4	35	61.5	82	93.4	70.4

Source: CELADE, on the basis of the Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) database.

It has been systematically verified that in the initial stages of youth, the early manifestation of the triad is characteristic of socially disadvantaged groups. This is so consistently the case that it has come to be considered an outstanding feature of the so-called demographic dynamics of poverty (ECLAC/CELADE, 1998; CELADE, 1994; Martínez, 1998; Livi-Bacci, 1995). Figure 5 shows that 20- to 24-year-old youths pertaining to the lowest socioeconomic quintile initiate sexual activity, marriage and reproduction much sooner than do youth in the highest quintile. In both quintiles, the start of sexual activity before the age of 20 is the component of the triad that demonstrates the highest incidence, while maternity before that age displays the lowest.

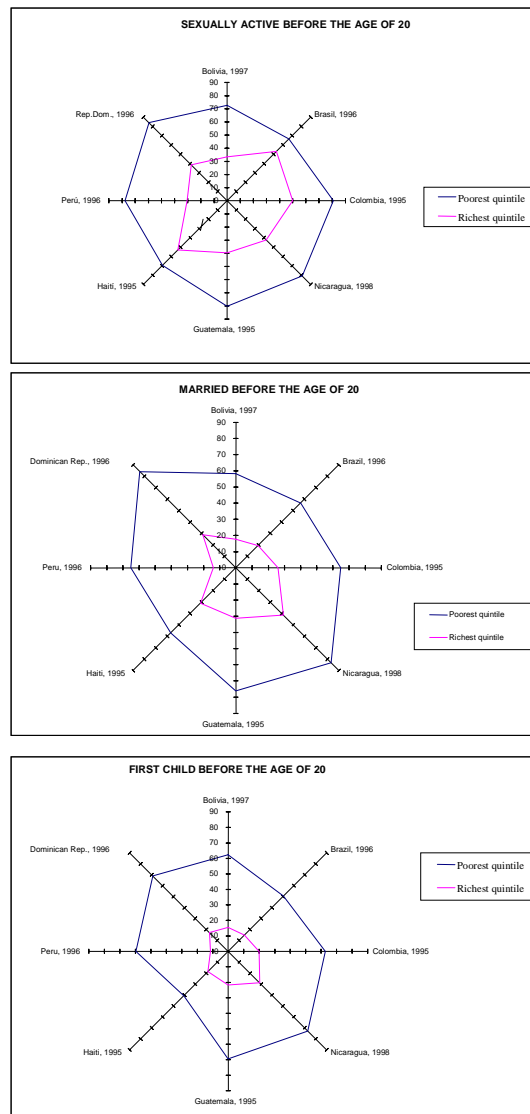
Socioeconomic disparities are much less pronounced with regard to the initiation of sexual activity than for marriage and reproduction, which proves that sexual behaviour can be relatively independent from marriage and reproduction. Thus, whereas sexually active girls from the upper socioeconomic strata exercise their reproductive right to minimize the risk of pregnancy associated with sexual activity, girls from the lower socioeconomic strata are much less successful in achieving such rights. In the case of Brazil, for example, three out of four underprivileged girls who became sexually active before the age of 20 were teenage mothers; among their counterparts from the upper socioeconomic levels, the figure is only one in four (see figure 5). In the majority of the countries analysed, more than 80% of poor youth became sexually active before the age of 20, which provides a clear indication of the potential demand for integrated sexual and reproductive health services among the poor.

The above figures contribute to the discussion on the effect of greater sexual permissiveness on the reproductive trends of the region's youth. The fact that young people from poor, rural, less-educated groups experience the triad of milestones sooner favours the hypothesis that their rather early reproductive trends —relative to those of the developed world— obey the traditional behavioural norms that are prevalent in the more disadvantaged segments of society. Adolescent fertility in the countries of the region, therefore, generally seems to result not from a “new sexual culture” that is more permissive, but rather from the persistence of an early triad among poor youths.

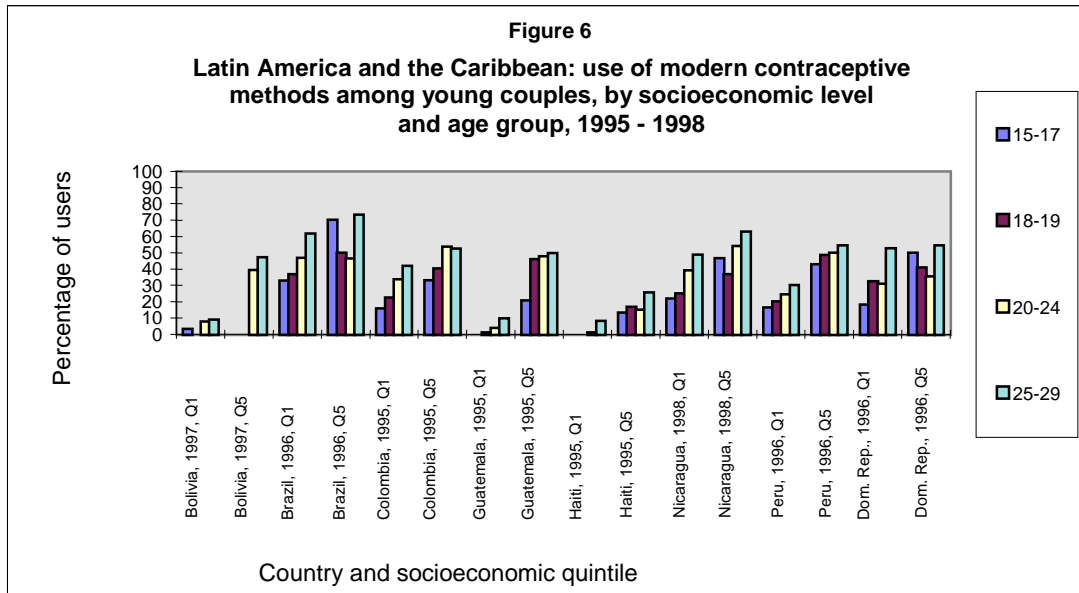
In contrast, sociocultural modernization, which is clearly embodied by the better-educated youth, would appear to favour a delay in the onset of the triad of milestones. The fact that greater education correlates with higher indices of premarital sexual activity and use of birth control supports the hypothesis that sociocultural modernization promotes a sexual culture which is more permissive but which also integrates protection against unwanted pregnancy and its consequences. It is thus unavoidable that in the future —because to date it has not yet occurred— sexual initiation will occur earlier and teenagers will generally be sexually active, as a result of modernization (and the more permissive sexual culture that accompanies it). If that occurs, the use of birth control, which this new sexual culture currently advocates, should also be generalized in order to avoid an increase in adolescent maternity/paternity.

The socioeconomic disparities among young people with regard to the triad of sexual, marital and reproductive initiation originate, then, from two types of factors. The first corresponds to traditional standards of early marriage that continue to predominate among poor youth. The second is the lower access of poor youth to methods of family planning. Figure 6 clearly illustrates a systematic variance in the use of modern contraceptives among young people from the highest and lowest social strata. In some countries, such as Bolivia and Guatemala, this situation is explained, in part, by the persistence of gaps in awareness on contraceptive methods (see table 3). Teenage girls from the lower socioeconomic quintile are the least informed with respect to contraception, despite the fact that, as already shown, they become sexually active sooner than girls from the higher socioeconomic stratum.

Figure 5
LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN: 20-TO 24-YEAR-OLD WOMEN
WHO BECAME SEXUALLY ACTIVE, MARRIED, AND HAD THEIR FIRST CHILD BEFORE THE
AGE OF 20, BY SOCIOECONOMIC QUINTILE, 1995-1998
(Percentages)



Source: On the basis of the Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) database.



Source: CELADE, on the basis of Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) database.

Table 3
**LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN: 15- TO 49-YEAR-OLD WOMEN
 WHO ARE FAMILIAR WITH MODERN CONTRACEPTIVE METHODS,
 BY AGE GROUP AND SOCIOECONOMIC QUINTILE, 1995-1998**
 (Percentage)

Country, year and socioeconomic quintile	Age group					
	15-17	18-19	20-24	25-29	30 and up	Total
Bolivia, 1997, Q1	49.1	61.5	61.8	61.9	56.0	57.2
Bolivia, 1997, Q5	95.8	94.3	97.6	98.7	99.2	97.9
Bolivia, 1997, total	84.3	88.0	89.5	89.9	85.1	86.7
Brazil, 1996, Q1	96.5	99.4	98.7	99.7	99.1	98.8
Brazil, 1996, Q5	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	99.9	100.0
Brazil, 1996 total	99.0	99.7	99.5	99.9	100.0	99.6
Colombia, 1995, Q1	91.0	99.1	99.4	100.0	99.2	98.3
Colombia, 1995, Q5	99.4	99.5	99.7	99.7	99.9	99.8
Colombia, 1995, total	98.2	99.7	99.8	99.9	99.8	99.6
Guatemala, 1995, Q1	30.3	48.6	55.2	62.6	58.2	54.1
Guatemala, 1995, Q5	89.0	91.4	97.1	94.9	98.7	95.7
Guatemala, 1995, total	64.7	72.6	77.8	83.1	82.5	78.2
Haiti, 1995, Q1	74.2	93.7	95.3	96.8	97.1	93.8
Haiti, 1995, Q5	98.3	100.0	99.7	99.5	100.0	99.6
Haiti, 1995, total	92.8	98.5	98.5	98.8	98.7	97.8
Nicaragua, 1998, Q1	80.9	86.7	93.3	93.1	93.4	90.8
Nicaragua, 1998, Q5	97.2	99.0	99.3	100.0	99.3	99.1
Nicaragua, 1998, total	92.4	96.8	97.9	98.5	98.2	97.2
Peru, 1996, Q1	64.3	80.7	84.8	90.3	83.3	82.4
Peru, 1996, Q5	96.3	98.8	99.4	99.9	99.8	99.2
Peru, 1996, total	90.9	94.8	96.8	97.8	95.8	95.6
Dominican Republic, 1996, Q1	98.5	98.1	98.8	99.5	99.3	99.0
Dominican Republic, 1996, Q5	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Dominican Republic, 1996, total	99.3	99.4	99.7	99.9	99.9	99.7

Source: CELADE, on the basis of the Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) database.

Note: Q1 = lowest socioeconomic quintile; Q5 = highest socioeconomic quintile.

In most countries of the region, however, familiarity with modern contraceptive methods is widespread among young people (see table 3), such that ignorance on the subject cannot explain differences in access to methods of family planning. In fact, figure 6 clearly shows that even in the countries where familiarity with modern contraceptives is almost universal, adolescent girls as a group, especially the poor, manifest a much lower use of contraceptives than do other groups of young people, which is symptomatic of sociocultural barriers or attitudes of rejection.

Finally, the implementation of sexual and reproductive health programmes would not only meet the unsatisfied demand for family planning, but it would also provide an instrument for increasing adolescent and youth awareness of and the availability of information on sexuality, the workings of male and female reproductive organs and sexually transmitted diseases. Venereal diseases tend to be a

frequent problem among young people.⁶ In the case of AIDS, data from the United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) indicates that adolescents are particularly vulnerable: of the total number of infected men, 29% in Brazil and 31% in Honduras were aged 10 to 19 years. Despite extensive efforts to raise awareness, several countries of the region still face enormous problems of ignorance, which are even greater with regard to preventative methods. Once again, ignorance —and with it, increased risk— proves to be greatest among poor youth. For example, two out of three poor Guatemalan young people “haven’t heard of AIDS.” In contrast, the figure is under 5% among young people from the upper class.

5. Challenges and priorities for youth policies

Latin American and Caribbean youth represent a crucial factor for achieving the objective of sustained and sustainable economic growth within a democratic context that guarantees a higher degree of equity and social integration. The principal challenge for the State, then, lies in ensuring the maximum utilization of young people’s potential contribution toward achieving social goals. This is particularly true with respect to those youth who, due to their family legacy, run serious risks of being excluded from all collective endeavours. In the region as a whole, four out of five young people live in urban areas; poverty is also concentrated in the cities, and youth households are the hardest hit. In other words, poverty is predominantly urban and predominantly young. Without ignoring the need to address the specific problems that affect other categories of youth, it is safe to conclude that the greatest challenges for effectively incorporating youth in development efforts involve working-class urban youth, who are exposed to the greatest risk of social exclusion. This phenomenon alludes to situations that combine insufficient skills for aspiring to a rising social mobility within modern productive structures (which relegate youth to unstable, insecure employment), the spatial concentration in urban neighbourhoods of young people with similar characteristics and the relative isolation from the rest of society, especially with regard to people and institutions that conform to the standards set by the central course of the social system (see box 7).

Box 7

THE ISOLATION OF WORKING-CLASS URBAN YOUTH

There are at least two justifications for highlighting the isolation of youth with respect to the rest of society. First, studies carried out in several countries of the region demonstrate that the social composition of neighbourhoods has a significant impact on the emergence of risky behaviours among young people; these behaviours include adolescent motherhood and disaffiliation with the education and labour systems. Second, the region’s youth seem to be dominated by an individualist bias, which apparently ignores the fact —however evident— that most people take on attitudes, habits, behaviours and ways of conceptualizing their reality that are very similar to those of the people with whom they most frequently interact. If the cities are essentially generating processes of segmentation and segregation among wide categories of youth —involving their confinement to neighbourhoods which share characteristics of uncertainty, low skill levels and little hope for the successful integration into modern society— then the contextual effect of this homogeneity will be manifested in the behaviour of each one of these young people, independent of their individual characteristics.

Source: ECLAC/CELADE (Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, Latin American and Caribbean Demographic Centre – Population Division), *Youth, population and development in Latin America and the Caribbean* (LC/L.1339), Santiago, Chile, March 2000.

⁶ For example, about 5% of young men in Brazil declared to have had at least one venereal disease in the 12 months preceding the survey (Guzmán and others, 2000).

5.1. Tasks for education: human resources, social integration and equity

Education is undoubtedly society's primary instrument for raising the level of its human resources capital and promoting the welfare and integration of its youth. Recurrent evidence on the transmission of human capital through families supports the assertion that the accumulation of these resources in one generation establishes a platform from which the next generation will begin its own process of accumulation. Similarly, any differences among the social strata in the accumulation of human resources precipitates inequalities in the next generation.

While the priorities in this area will obviously vary according to the level of development of each country's education system, five common challenges can be identified:

- (1) generalizing access to basic and especially secondary education;
- (2) ensuring adequate standards for quality and student performance, while decisively confronting the problem of students leaving the public system in search of better opportunities in private education and training;
- (3) orienting teaching methods toward the creation of capacities for "learning to learn", under the assumption that the continued acceleration of technological innovation will periodically require workers to re-enroll in training programmes;
- (4) ensuring that no segments of the youth population remain computer illiterate, as this condition reduces their possibilities for participating in the modern world; and
- (5) substantially improving equity among the various social groups, via education programmes that dismantle the mechanisms for educational segmentation.

Although the educational reforms currently underway attack socioeconomic differences in the quality of education, the same is not true for educational segmentation. Promoting opportunities for students from distinct socioeconomic strata to interact, while attending the same educational establishments, represents another determinant of the quality of training. Thus, within the framework of strategies for alleviating problems of social integration, several developed countries implement actions explicitly intended to reduce educational segmentation, such as bussing students from poor neighbourhoods to schools in wealthier neighbourhoods, and vice versa. The educational reforms implemented in Latin American and Caribbean countries to achieve the qualitative improvement of public education can constitute indirect measures for halting segmentation. The efficacy of such measures will be greater in those cases in which neighbourhood subcultures have not yet been consolidated. Once consolidation occurs, however, the strength of adolescent and youth commitment to the group's own code of rules emerges as a barrier that is very difficult to overcome, because participation in these subcultures fulfils their needs for identity and self-esteem. If youth from segregated neighbourhoods attend the same school, the campus can become a battlefield between the groups, each of which stands firmly by its own code of rules.

Raising educational quality and coverage and preventing segmentation processes contribute to equity and the social integration of youth by lessening the inequality of opportunities for access to the labour market and citizenship. Education is also an effective means of attacking "demographic inequity"

(for the sake of calling it something). As anticipated, this inequity results from the different trends that young people from different social strata display with regard to leaving home, and it is manifested in the unequal distribution of responsibility for the biological and social reproduction of the population.

It is well known that educational achievement produces a strong indirect effect on reproductive behaviour. Greater knowledge allows youth to formulate goals for their effective social integration into modern society, which contributes to incorporating the rationality that is instrumental in their decisions on building stable unions, family size and the timing of births. Education can also have a direct effect on these decisions when it provides students with tools for more responsibly and effectively managing their sexuality and reproductive behaviour. Such teaching is still absent from a good part of the region's educational curricula. Governments are becoming increasingly concerned, however, with regard to adolescent fertility, the increase in the number of children born to single parents, the proliferation of consensual unions, the increase in separations and divorces and the consequences of all these phenomena on child development. This concern is reflected in the emergence of a debate on the merits of including "family" as an additional subject for secondary education.

5.2. The importance of general and reproductive health for youth welfare

Health is another indispensable factor in the sustainability of development. Good physical and mental condition contribute to improving and strengthening people's performance in daily activities not only in the productive realm, but also in the spheres of relationships and the fulfilment of civic responsibilities. Women's health, in particular, is a key factor, as is health care for children in the early stages of the life cycle, which will condition their future development one way or another. Health —especially reproductive health— is thus a crucial factor in the fight against poverty and social inequality (ECLAC/CELADE, 1998).

As in the case of education, priorities in the field of health vary among countries and even within them. Even so, at least two challenges directly linked to youth are common throughout the region:

(i) detecting and confronting —via timely, effective treatment— the primary risk behaviours, especially those related to traffic accidents, legal and illegal drug use and activities associated with different forms of violence; and

(ii) promoting healthy lifestyles, including a wide range of cultural, recreational and sports activities, in environments that are suitable for the personal and social growth and maturation of the targeted individuals.

While the ministries of education and health play a central role in achieving this type of goal, they should encourage all the relevant actors —both public and private— to participate fully and actively. They should favour the development of healthy municipalities and educator cities, and ensure that youth are directly involved in the design, execution and evaluation of specific programmes and plans.

In virtue of the tremendous importance of reproductive trends, securing the universal exercise of reproductive rights is a basic principal that should inform the design and implementation of policies in this area. This implies guaranteeing that all individuals have access to information and methods for effectively managing their sexual behaviour. This universalization will allow individuals to control the

reproductive and health consequences of their behaviour. It will facilitate the synchronization of their reproductive trends with the most general definition of what they want in life, and thereby ensure that the opposite does not occur—that reproductive decisions or behaviour do not define their futures.

Trends in the manifestation of the triad among young people (i.e., the age at which sexual activity, marriage and reproduction first take place) are highly relevant for policy formulation.⁷ When this triad acts as a syndrome—that is, when the three components are tightly linked and occur simultaneously or in close sequence—it hinges on the early formation of a union, which is usually founded for reproductive purposes, such that teenage pregnancy is difficult to avoid. This scenario calls for both preventative and corrective measures. Preventative measures aim to provide young couples, even when they marry early, with the means for exercising their basic reproductive rights, that is, the capacity for regulating family size and choosing when to have children. In particular—and without overlooking the fact that the mere establishment of unions at early ages is difficult to reconcile with the requirements of modern society—finding a way to widen the gap between marriage and reproduction seems desirable, due to its positive consequences for the social performance of youth and adolescents in contemporary societies. Achieving this goal requires designing sexual and reproductive health programmes that specifically target youth; such programmes should be supported through efforts in raising awareness and providing education and counselling, because they will probably run into resistance from the same sociocultural forces that trigger the early triad syndrome.

Corrective measures, in turn, should be oriented toward eroding social norms that promote early marriage—especially when they stem from arrangements between adults without the consent of the adolescents in question—and broadening the opportunities and options that give young people alternatives to early marriage. Efforts aimed at modifying norms of early marriage should necessarily be accompanied by programmes that help couples minimize the sexual and reproductive health risks involved; this means educating them on how to avoid damages and diseases associated with sexual relations.

Empirical data suggest that two factors of sociocultural modernization explain some cases in which the triad does not operate as a syndrome. One is the expansion of premarital and extramarital sexual relations; the other is the use of various contraceptive methods by married couples to regulate their fertility timeline, which favours the widening of the gap between trends in marriage and reproduction. This scenario appears to be more consistent with the free exercise of youth reproductive rights and more compatible with the demands of modern society, but it gives rise to new challenges for sexual and reproductive health. The first has to do with the growing percentage of children born to unmarried couples and single parents. These children may be the object of legal discrimination, and even under legislation that is free of such biases, they have a higher probability of being raised in unstable, problematic family environments. The second challenge entails the provision of sexual and reproductive health services capable of satisfying at least two types of demand: (1) that of consolidated unions seeking to monitor their reproductive health, avoid diseases associated with sexual activity and regulate fertility (planning pregnancy rather than avoiding it); and (2) that of sexually active singles, who usually wish to prevent pregnancy and reduce their exposure to the transmission of venereal diseases.

⁷ This analysis does not address the issue of values, which generate opposing viewpoints with respect to these changes in norms of sexual behaviour.

A third challenge lies in the fact that adolescents are subjected to increasingly powerful signals—originating from a range of sources, such as the mass media— which encourage them to become sexually active. When they do so before marriage or the formation of a stable union, however, their actions are the object of cultural sanctions. Thus a significant percentage of sexually active teenagers are trapped in a virtual no man’s land: they are encouraged to be sexually active, but they are denied access to contraceptive methods that would, at the very least, allow them to avoid the risk of unwanted pregnancy deriving from their sexual activity.⁸ It is necessary to revise such social prohibitions and to promote the specific design of reproductive health programmes that target unmarried but sexually active adolescents and youth. Integrated programmes combining education, the raising of awareness, counselling and the provision of birth control appear more relevant for adolescents than for any other age group.

Adolescent psychosocial characteristics demand specialized treatment that is sensitive to both the complex ways in which teenagers usually experience their sexuality and the course of their decisions, which can seem erratic and rash when judged according to adult mentalities. A challenge for these programmes—one that is particularly difficult to address— involves introducing increasing degrees of maturity and responsibility in the decisions that unmarried teenagers make about sexuality, relationships and reproduction. It is generally recognized that mere education is not enough in this regard: “Formal education and sex education cannot by themselves guarantee responsible sexual and reproductive behaviour. Teenagers need special programmes that are carefully designed to influence their sexual, nuptial and reproductive patterns” (ECLAC/CELADE, 1998). These programmes should not become an additional factor promoting sexual activity among unmarried adolescents. If adolescents took appropriate precautions in the course of premarital sexual activity, their actions would not imply involuntary upheavals in their planned future nor be incompatible with their entry into modern society—unlike the consequences of other reproductive behaviours. However, because of the degree of psychosocial immaturity common among teenagers, sexual activity exposes them to the risk of adverse emotional consequences and leads to more “volatile” preventative behaviour.

The marked socioeconomic differences in reproductive trends undermine the poorest groups. Preventing the accrued results of high fertility requires reproductive health programmes that cover the entire fertile period of the life cycle. In contrast, if the goal is to alter the much earlier manifestation of the triad among poor youth, the programmes and actions should be more focused. Whether the goal is to delay the triad or to try to minimize its effects on trends in sexual health and reproduction, it is necessary to concentrate efforts on the poorest groups of the population, which comprise precisely those young people who generally lack options in life and alternative opportunities to “traditional” reproductive behaviours. Moreover, available data show that higher levels of unwanted pregnancy persist among the poor, which is an indication that there is a large unsatisfied demand for family planning services, at least with regard to controlling the number of children.

According to available data, almost all poor teenage girls need access to integral programmes for sexual and reproductive health. In Guatemala, Nicaragua and the Dominican Republic, the proportion of poor youth married before the age of 20 is similar to the proportion that became sexually active before that age, revealing a close relation between the two behaviours. This suggests that the vast majority of poor adolescent girls who should receive sexual and reproductive health care are married, which reduces

⁸ This limitation generates paradoxical and risky situations. A recent study concluded that in Jamaica, where knowledge about contraceptive methods is widespread and sexual activity is initiated at an early age, it is easier for adolescent girls to obtain an abortion than to acquire contraceptives.

the risk of social or parental disapproval of their access to these programmes and facilitates the incorporation of the partner. In other countries, such as Brazil and Colombia, the proportion of poor women who became sexually active before the age of 20 is several percentage points higher than the proportion who married before that age. Reproductive health programmes should therefore target that segment of poor adolescents who are sexually active and unmarried, as they can experience serious difficulties and tensions with respect to their access to these programmes (due to family and social disapproval of their condition). These girls run a greater risk of unwanted pregnancy and more often feel pressured to resort to abortion, normally in substandard conditions. For all countries, data on the ways in which poor adolescents experience maternity suggest that any strategy for reaching these young women through sexual and reproductive health programmes should incorporate efforts to broaden the mechanisms that reinforce adolescent identity and life horizons.

Even within an optimistic scenario of a successful implementation of programmes for sexual and reproductive health, teenage pregnancies will continue to exist, and a proportion of them will occur outside of marriage. This implies two types of challenges: (1) preventing community or family sanctions against adolescent fertility, especially premarital fertility, from restricting access to necessary pre- and post-natal health care, inducing a search for surreptitious solutions (usually under precarious conditions, as with abortion) or provoking the adolescents to drop out of or be expelled from the education system; and (2) helping teenage parents to minimize the negative impacts that this condition can have on the course of their lives.

5.3. Facilitating youth entry into the labour force

Access to job opportunities increasingly depends on the level of education achieved and its quality. In the case of the first job—in which the young people, for lack of experience, do not command their own social capital in the work world—such access also depends on the social capital accrued via one's sojourn in the education system, neighbourhood friendships and especially family networks. Those who enter into self-employment—for example, freelance workers or small business owners—also have their physical or financial capital. In sum, youth access to job opportunities depends on their assets. The first key to understanding exclusion from the labour market, then, lies in the good or bad performance of the sources for building assets in human resources and social capital. Working-class urban youth, in particular, are characterized by poverty in this regard.

The number of youth whose assets have not kept pace with market demands is substantial. At the world level, the debate on these problems has given rise to numerous, mutually compatible alternatives for action. One such alternative involves establishing a “citizen salary” that would guarantee each person an adequate minimum income to cover the value of a basic consumer basket. A second option is to provide forms of training on par with the development of first work experiences, thereby circumventing two of the principal factors in youth unemployment—lack of experience and lack of training. A third alternative is to build bridges between the formal education system (in its intermediate levels) and the productive structure. Finally, a fourth option involves the creation of public agencies that operate as links for transmitting information between the business world and the work world. The possibility of promoting subsistence micro-enterprises and development-oriented micro-enterprises should also be considered.

While general training initiatives are still fully valid, the most successful programmes are those that target the most vulnerable youth sectors, utilize decentralized operation schemes (which assigns a

protagonistic role to the municipalities), are carried out on the basis of non-monopolistic criteria (ensuring the participation of various public and private training entities) and have strict mechanisms for monitoring and evaluation. Some programmes have also successfully augmented the apprenticeship and training processes with support for entry into the labour market, which requires agreements between the training entities and businesses.

Training alone does not generate employment, however. Given the difficulty of creating employee positions, efforts focus on the generation of independent employment via the promotion of micro-enterprises and small businesses. Among the micro-enterprises, it is important to distinguish between subsistence versus development-oriented micro-enterprises. The former pertain to the informal sector of the economy, hire low-skill workers and are run by families or neighbours in small locations. Development-oriented micro-enterprises, in contrast, are integrated into the modern sector of the economy through their association with medium-sized and large enterprises that subcontract services and, on an ad-hoc basis, specific jobs, and they employ highly qualified technical and professional personnel, usually in rising economic sectors such as information technology.

Young people participate to a large extent in both types of micro-enterprises, and they could increase their participation in the future. To facilitate their entry into development-oriented micro-enterprises, it is necessary to provide effective training that promotes their creative, efficient contribution. In this area, the Junior Achievement programme stands out as an enlightening example: on the basis of practical experience in secondary schools, the programme provides business training with the support of business people who act as tutors. Improving the connections between these initiatives and public policies on youth entry into the workforce will make a great contribution to creating broader, better job possibilities for young people.

5.4. Promoting the social integration of youth

An inherent attribute of youth, and one that is rarely mentioned, is that at this stage of life, a sense of citizenship —of belonging to a nation— takes hold as a fundamental element in the formation of individual identity. In addition to the effective exercise of formal rights, this sense of citizenship naturally coalesces out of the experience of sharing a community of interests and problems with the rest of the population. Catastrophes, for example, often generate a sort of explosion of civic conscience and awaken solidarity among people. In contrast, inequalities, the segmentation of the provision of basic services and residential segregation weaken sentiments of belonging to a greater collective.

Beyond advances in the fight against poverty and in the specific elements of welfare, all policies that propose to promote the integration of youth into society should consider the segmentation problems found in all kinds of services, from education and health to services related to recreation and relaxation. Namely, sectoral policies should incorporate a concern for segmentation among categories of youth as an ever-present theme in the design and implementation of their actions. Young people are very sensitive to any type of discrimination because they are in the midst of forming their own identities, which somehow synthesizes the reactions of their environment toward various aspects of their personality. Although many eventually do conform, they do not cease to resent the continued corroboration that they are “second-class citizens,” which they see reflected in their access to low-quality education and health services and in their dealings with bureaucracies whose behaviour reveals a failure to acknowledge their civic rights.

One of the problem areas that has drawn increasing attention from specialists on subjects relating to youth —especially those who analyse the nature, causes and consequences of social exclusion phenomena— is the sharp residential segregation found in large cities. The neighbourhoods that house people who share experiences of job insecurity and low skills tend to be isolated from the rest of society, which reduces informal contacts with people who behave according to the modal norms of that society. Among youth, that isolation —and the consequent absence of opportunities for exposure to models that combine success and efforts via legitimate channels— appears to favour high-risk behaviours, like dropping out of school, drug use, failure to enter the labour market and teenage pregnancy.

Although the countries of the region have not yet collected extensive data on the effects of the neighbourhood context on youth behaviour, that which is available indicates that social policies do not encompass zoning initiatives that could promote better standards of social interaction (and integration). In contrast, many developed countries are aware of the importance of the problem; they have undertaken multiple studies on the subject and are implementing deliberate policies to address it.

Access to housing is a related issue, since it constitutes a central factor in youth trends with regard to leaving home and attaining autonomy. It is common for young people to establish serious relationships but to continue living with the parents of one of the partners. The region has made considerable achievements in the area of housing tenancy, such that a majority of households are currently owner occupied. Many of these achievements originated in public policies that incorporated various combinations of measures, such as the legalization of squatter settlements, the construction of the basic infrastructure for housing whose completion was left in the hands of the owners and the subsidized construction of apartment blocks or entire neighbourhoods. However, focused as they were on making optimal use of the generally scarce share of housing in total social public spending, and often lacking background data as well, these policies failed to consider the social costs associated with the concentration of poverty in homogeneously precarious neighbourhoods.

Demographic projections indicate that the youth population will begin to grow more slowly in the majority of countries of the region. Combined with the already existing stock of owner-occupied housing, this will help reduce the pressure for new housing and consequently widen the margin for housing policy design. This could constitute an “opportunity” for housing programmes, in the sense that they could incorporate this experience with regard to the social consequences of the concentration of poverty in homogeneous neighbourhoods, as well as international experience in the fight against residential segregation and proven innovations in the area of credit policies, with the goal of designing zoning alternatives aimed at integrating households headed by young couples into the central course of the social system.

A central component of the social integration of youth is their civic participation, which is a necessary condition for strengthening democracy and which can be encouraged through more effective, attractive channels for exercising youth rights and fulfilling their civic responsibilities. Promoting youth participation in the political sphere will be facilitated insofar as the modernization of relevant practices opens spaces for youth to execute a range of advisory roles, such as the definition of action programmes at the municipal level. At the same time, the loss of credibility endemic among political parties and leaders must be reversed. Such developments will help ensure that youth do not feel manipulated and that they perceive the weight of their participation within the decision making process. It is also appropriate to emphasize civic formation as an element of formal and informal education and to coordinate youth opinion surveys and debates on contemporary issues through the mass media.

Encouraging civic participation further requires a revitalization of the mechanisms for student representation, which must be divested of the bureaucratic, excessively politicized style common in the past. More generally, national and local youth counsels should be established to articulate networks of organizations and to represent youth interests before public powers, with a view to avoiding so-called clientelist practices. Building pluralist collective institutions, which combat isolation, can facilitate the entry of youth into all levels of society, promote their contribution to development and advance the accumulation of social capital in the communities in which the young people live and interact.

The above observations establish the importance of understanding youth from two complementary angles: as the targeted consumers for a range of public services intended to ameliorate social exclusion and vulnerability, and as strategic actors in the development process. Within this framework, the promotion of volunteer work emerges as a possible central element in public policies relating to youth. Large-scale youth participation can thus become a force in programmes for fighting poverty, literacy campaigns, the construction of community infrastructure or environmental defense (see box 8).

Box 8

YOUTH AS STRATEGIC ACTORS IN DEVELOPMENT: VOLUNTEER WORK

Youth volunteer programmes can have a range of simultaneous effects that positively reinforce one another, because they expose youth to experiences through which they can mature and become more familiar with their local and national environment, at the same time that they realize clearly visible efforts in both community and national development. Not only would such initiatives stimulate the consolidation of social institutions for participation that are highly esteemed by the youth, but they would also help confront the stigmas that affect young people. At the same time, volunteer work would contribute to reducing the costs of supplying services which would otherwise be realized through the use of hired public administration personnel or via contracts with private businesses. Youth who participate in volunteer programmes should be adequately trained; to achieve this, some public and private institutions should specialize in offering training programmes for the type of service involved. Universities, as well as the numerous non-governmental organizations that operate in these areas, are in a position to fulfil this function. To facilitate the necessary linkages, youth ministries and institutes can serve as coordinating agencies for the volunteer initiatives, without intervening directly in the operational management.

Youth volunteer programmes are ambitious, but they have great potential both for the young people themselves and for society as a whole. Feasible initiatives can be based on a set of activities that are already being undertaken in several countries in the region. In the Caribbean, Central America and Venezuela, youth participation in relief efforts following natural disasters (e.g., floods, volcanic eruptions, hurricanes, earthquakes) offer many concrete examples worthy of greater recognition. They demonstrate that youth volunteer work provides an excellent option not only for transforming collective suffering into solidarity and mutual support but also for raising community awareness of the ways in which intergenerational cooperation can improve the quality of life.

Source: ECLAC/CELADE (Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, Latin American and Caribbean Demographic Centre – Population Division), Youth, population and development in Latin America and the Caribbean (LC/L.1339), Santiago, Chile, March 2000.

Volunteer programmes can represent an indispensable means of facilitating intergenerational relations. In the coming decades, the transition process that is unfolding in the countries of the region will open a “window of demographic opportunity”: as the very large share of children in the total population shrinks, this segment will no longer require the degree of social assistance accorded it in the recent past, but it will be some time yet before older adults constitute a large share of the total. Although the demographic transition displays heterogeneous trends among countries, the current relation between the active and inactive populations in most of the region is probably the most favourable it has ever been. This should be used to advantage to promote productive transformation, growth of savings and investment, social modernization and democratic reinforcement, while decisively combating existing social inequalities and promoting the widest possible participation at all levels of the population. In this context, youth are summoned to fulfil a protagonistic role, due to their greater relative qualification, their greater flexibility for keeping pace with new technologies and changing labour processes and their ever-ready willingness to take on new and complex challenges. A strong backing for the Latin American and Caribbean youth at this particular stage of history is the best response to the renewed challenges for the region’s development in the new century.

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